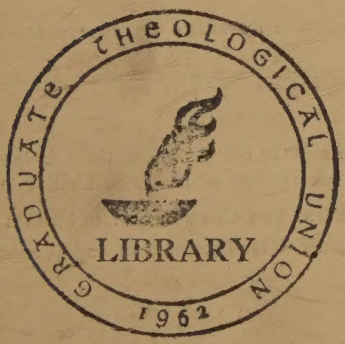
Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

THE JOYS OF CHRISTMAS



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SERMONS

OF

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

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THE JOYS OF CHRISTMAS.

"Through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."—LUKE i. 78, 79.

I WILL speak to you this morning of the joy of Christmas. The peculiarity of Christmas joy is that it belongs to the present life, to the present hour, to earthly homes, human love, and is therefore universal. Christmas stands for the blessings which all men inherit by being born under the influences of Christianity, — the birthright blessings of all of us. Easter is also a feast of joy, but it is for those who have faith in immortality. It is a festival of hope, looking forward to a higher world. But Christmas brings pleasure to the believer and unbeliever. No one need sign a creed or make a profession in order to have a happy Christmas. It is the festival of childhood, of children who have no religious opinions of any kind: it is a feast of joy even in the homes of those whose faith has died out of their hearts. As the sun shines on the evil and the good, on the just and the unjust, so Christmas pours its liberal light into every home. All are in fellowship with each other around the Christmas tree. All are Christ's little ones together. This is the blessed feeling which Christmas brings every year,— a communion of joy in the coming of a little child. For one week we have a truly catholic and universal church, in which are no divisions, no sects nor parties, no saints nor sinners. Around the cradle of this infant all are one.

Christmas is the apotheosis of infancy. It hallows all infants.

It makes all childhood sacred. Every infant in Christian lands is a Christ-child. It is no longer as necessary to say "Take heed how ye despise these little ones" as it was when Jesus said it. In the rudest homes, in the worst conditions of society, the coming of a little child brings a sense of gratitude, wonder, reverence. The star of the magi still stands over the lowliest cradle. The angel song is heard in the hearts of the humblest parents. Christmas makes an aureole of heavenly light around all the infants in Christian lands.

But Christmas is more than this. While Easter gives hope of an immortal life, Christmas brings to us the hope of a better life in this world. There descends on humanity, every Christmas day, an implicit hope that the world is to be redeemed from its wrongs and sins. It is not explicit; it is not often expressed to ourselves. It is a feeling hidden in the heart, not any distinct thought. All inspirations, before they become clear to the intelligence, begin thus as obscure sentiments, which, like seeds hidden in the ground, develop afterward into opinions, beliefs, and knowledge.

Such a sentiment comes every Christmas to all of us. Evil is overcome for a while by good. The world is not as bad a place as it seemed. Christmas comes like sunshine after storm. The clouds roll away in great purple masses, making a background of shade behind meadows, woods, and hills, all bathed in the same glorious light. Whatever be the cause of this glad, hopeful feeling which pervades all Christian lands at this time, the fact is evident. Gloomy and cynical philosophers are silent; gloomy theologians retire. What minister, be he ever so orthodox, would think of preaching about hell and eternal punishment on Christmas day! We sing the hymns of joy, we read the psalms of thanksgiving, at this time. The world is not altogether a vale of tears, even to the sad-browed Calvin.

It was a fortunate thing for the poor slaves that the South took its customs from the Church of England, and not from the

Puritans. For the slaves had their merry Christmas, and during one week in the long year the weight of their bondage was lightened. They could go and come, and be happy in their cabins, eat and drink, sing, dance, and play. They became as little children, and the blessing of the Christ-child fell on them too.

I once attended a midnight mass in the Cathedral of Geneva on the night before Christmas. The full moon bathed the marble walls in soft beauty, and when we entered we found the vast space filled with a crowd listening to the glad music and gazing at the ceremonies of the high altar. We stood near a chapel, where, carved in stone, knelt the figure of a cardinal of the Pallavicini house, while around him were kneeling princes and beggars, old men and little children. Such a union in common worship does men good; it puts them in mind of the ever-present providence of God, who continually sends to his children new prophets and redeemers, coming in the form of little children.

On Christmas all the world unites in a common gladness. All over Germany the Christmas trees are lighted. In England the yule-log is still kindled in the baronial halls; though Walter Scott lamented that even in his day many of the old Christmas customs had gone by,—

> "On Christmas eve, the bells were rung;
> On Christmas eve, the mass was sung.
> . . . . . .
> Then opened wide the baron's hall
> To vassal, tenant, serf, and thrall.
> All hailed, with uncontrolled delight
> And general voice, the happy night
> That to the cottage and the town
> Brought tidings of salvation down."

If we attempt to analyze the feeling which belongs to the birth of Christ, it may be that we see in the case of the infant Jesus how God sends, in a new-born child, new hope for the children of men. The world is ever made new by the arrival

of children. In every little child there appears the possibility of a new spiritual and moral impulse. Unimagined hopes cluster around every cradle. We know what men are,— they have shown their possibilities; but no one knows what new possibilities are hidden from our sight in each infant. He may be a Shakspere or a Newton, the prophet of a new age, the saint who shall inspire a purer faith, the sage to discover the laws which shall mould a better civilization, the reformer to unbind heavy burdens and remove all miseries. Thus hope comes to us with little children. They may be the seeds of mighty possibilities, of forces giving a new impulse to the race. Though we are bound fast in the chains of inexorable law, of fixed external conditions, every infant brings a new and incalculable factor of moral force; and through each of these little ones there is an open way by which the higher world may come down into ours to produce new morals and better manners.

Christmas and its joys are the unconscious testimony of the human heart to the universal blessings which have been given man by the birth of one child. This joy is confined to no church. It belongs to Roman Catholic and Protestant, to the Greek Church and the Armenian, to the Quaker and the Unitarian. It passes easily beyond the boundaries of profession and name. It is not requisite that a man shall even be a Christian in order to enjoy Christmas. For some feelings become a part of the spiritual constitution of our race. They come to us by the law of heredity. We inherit these promises; we inherit this spiritual life. Generation after generation has been fed by the words, the life, the death, the resurrection, of Jesus, until we have in the very texture and fibre of our nature a tendency to certain convictions and purposes. Our Christian faith is born with us and gives us an unconscious and involuntary joy. We look at the world with a glad expectation, we look to the future with a happy hope, which we should not have had if Jesus had not been born.

There is no doubt that the whole Christian world has a more living sense of the nearness of God, of his providence, of his love, than it would have had but for the profound faith of Jesus. A sense of the fatherly love of God has become a part of your instinctive faith and mine. It is not merely a belief of our judgment, but a feeling of our heart. Jesus has brought mankind nearer to the Father. When we listen to a Hindu like Mozoomdar, and hear him tell how, without any Christian missionary or Christian church, he was brought into the peace of God by the power of Jesus, we see that such divine truths as these can be carried over the whole world in ways we know not of. Many shall come from the east and the west, and sit down with Peter and Paul, Augustine and Luther, Channing and Stanley, Martineau, Wesley, and Swedenborg, in the kingdom of heaven. Then they will say, "The Holy Spirit, which is like the wind and breathes where it will, has taken of the things of Jesus and shown them unto us." We also cry, "Abba, Father!" So we, too, belong to the household of God. Invisible influences carry the seeds of truth from continent to continent, and no one can tell how they come or how they go. The aspirations of the soul, the hunger of the human heart for divine love, the unconquerable mind of man looking out of the things seen to those unseen,—these are the mighty angels which fly through the heavens, bearing the great faiths of the soul from shore to shore.

You and I, my dear friends, have known sorrow. We have all had our dark hours, our lonely days,—the times when the heavens gathered blackness and love died out of our hearts. Then there came to us a dawn of hope, light out of darkness. Some peace fell gently into our soul. We saw again that all things were working together for good while we trusted and loved God. We heard the voice of Jesus, saying, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." Some words of Christ's which we had heard a hundred times suddenly came up in our soul

with a new power. As the seed which has long remained dry and seemingly dead begins at last to germinate and sends up its stalk and opens its leaves and flowers, so the truths of Jesus, hidden in the heart, come up to be our strength and salvation in these great crises.

I have known those who had elaborated a theory by which the whole universe was turned into a mechanism, and God found to be an unnecessary hypothesis. The great web of law and force was woven ceaselessly without any divine providence. Their system seemed complete on every side. "There can be no such thing," they said, "as sin or salvation; for man's conduct is the result of irresistible forces in his brain and blood. What we call conscience is a modification of the gray matter of the brain. Immortality is not only unproved, but it is unprovable. Righteousness is a question of temperament." The theory was carefully elaborated and seemed to be demonstrated. But all at once we hear that these advanced thinkers, so triumphant in their unanswerable logic, have gone into the Roman Catholic Church, or been confirmed in the Episcopal Church, or been converted by Moody and Sankey. What was the cause of this sudden conversion? It was because they had left out of their system the hunger of their own heart for something infinite and eternal. They had reasoned as though man were only an argumentative machine. They had denied the existence of a soul, and their soul had suddenly claimed its rights. The whole of their admirable system melted away, like the ice palace in St. Petersburg at the return of the sun. Then how sweet seemed the divine love of Jesus, which showed once more the face of a heavenly Father! God spoke to them in their hearts, and said, "This my son was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found."

There are hours also in which we are conscious of sin. We had thought ourselves strong, and find that we are weak. We meant to do right, and we go wrong. We repay kindness

with ingratitude; we lead lives of worldliness, empty of any solid reality; we are selfish and wilful, and do not see how we can ever be different. What blessed influence is it which then calls out of our memory the words of Christ: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee." "Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more." "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." "The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." "I came to seek and save those who are lost." In that hour we have found the friend we need,—the only one in all this wide world who can bring to us the sense of an infinite, inexhaustible pardoning love. Everywhere else we find the inexorable law that what we sow we reap: we have what we pay for. The proverbs of the world announce blessings for the prudent, the wise, the industrious, the faithful. The philosophy of the world teaches the inflexible, inexorable action of natural law. The Bible itself declares that those who sow to the flesh shall reap corruption, and that every man shall be judged according to his works. We assent to this law that it is good. We readily admit that this is all true. But what hope, then, for those who have gone wrong? What an infinite blessing it is at last to see that besides law there is love, that God has not forgotten or forsaken his poor, weak, sinful child, and that the very deepest meaning of the life of Jesus is that he brings a hope to the utterly discouraged and forsaken! When we come to this, what a joy enters the heart! Then we say, "I will arise and go to my Father!" He who has gone through this experience has the witness in himself that Jesus has been sent to him by God. He needs no "evidences of Christianity." He does not care about the proof from prophecy and miracles. It is nothing to him that he is not able to show that the Fourth Gospel was written by John. His faith in Jesus rests on a more solid foundation than argument. "The life I now live," he says, "I live by faith

in the Son of God." "I know that I have passed from despair and misery to peace and joy, and that I owe this to the coming of the Son of Man." It is not necessary that a child should know how to prove by satisfactory logic the existence and the goodness of his father and mother. He loves them, and his love is the best knowledge. He who loves dwells in God, and God in him; and he needs no other evidence.

There are hours of bereavement which come to us all, when those we love the most and who love us best disappear from our side and leave us alone. In those sad moments we say: "Shall I ever see thee again, my brother, my friend, thou whose love for me was so wonderful? Has this most blessed gift of human life been given only to be taken away again? What proof have I of immortality? The old arguments which seemed strong enough when I had all I loved about me are too weak now! Open your lips, O secret, hidden from the foundation of the world! Where have they gone, the wise, the tender, the noble souls whose friendship made life worth living?"

At such times argument is worthless. We do not wish to have a future life made probable, we wish to know it. And Jesus never argues for immortality by our methods of reasoning. He beholds it by a mighty intuition, and speaks of it with a certainty which awakens our own deepest faith.

He says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." "Because I live, ye shall live also." The only sufficient evidence of future immortality is present immortality. He who lives now in the presence of eternal things — God, truth, justice, infinite love, a perfect Providence — he finds immortal life abiding in him. This inward experience of eternal things makes us sure of undying being. Death disappears from our sight while we thus live: only life remains. Every prayer for strength to do our duty brings us into communion with the unseen world. Every faithful effort to do well, every hour of patient endurance, puts us into communion with the things above. Thus Jesus, by lift-

ing us into a nobler region of present life, plants within us convictions of immortality. "He who lives and believes in me shall never die." He who lives now as I live, he who believes in the truth which I make known, to him death is nothing.

The great blessing, then, which Jesus has bestowed on mankind, and which makes the whole world joyful because of his coming, is that he leads us up into a richer and fuller life. It is not that he teaches truths never known before, or that he had supernatural power over the outward world. It is that he has made God's love, God's providence, divine truth, immortality, a part of the experience of mankind. He has made these convictions to enter into our knowledge, far beneath the region of speculation and argument. Argument and reasoning give us opinions and beliefs, but knowledge comes only from experience. Only by experience of outward things we know the outward world; by inward experience alone we know the world of infinite truth, beauty, and love. Jesus has given to mankind the great impulse which has quickened in them these experiences, and so he continues to-day to be the best friend and helper of the human race.

There is a beautiful legend that on Christmas all evil spirits are deprived of their power to harm, and that even the devils and the accursed in hell enjoy a brief rest from sin and misery. Shakspere has used this legend: —

> "Ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
> The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
> And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
> The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
> . . . . . .
> So hallowed and so gracious is the time."

However that may be, it is certainly true that many evil spirits are held in check by the coming of Christmas. Christmas assuaged the spirit of oppression at the South, and brought rest

to the slave; it pacifies the strife of parties, and makes a vacation in the bitterness of politics; it suspends the quarrels of sects. The hard bigot on one side and the sharp infidel on the other take each other's hands over the child's cradle. The man who bitterly attacks Christianity and he who defends it with an equal bitterness enjoy a kindly Christmas side by side. All this is a presage of the time when wars shall cease; when the whole Church shall be one; when the Christ of love and truth shall be everywhere accepted, obeyed, and loved, and the knowledge of God shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.